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ABSTRACT

The importance of the liberal arts for society as well as for the education of the individual is discussed in this speech. The liberal arts are integral to achieving proficiency in all disciplines; they provide the context of values in which further, specialized development takes place. Liberal education also affords a means of recognizing and utilizing the patterns of continuity that run through history, which free us from the tyranny of forever learning by trial and error. Liberal education is the vehicle by which the young acquire wisdom and skills of a civilization. Fewer students are electing to pursue courses of study in the liberal arts, and fewer required courses in these studies are being offered. The abandonment of the liberal arts raises disturbing questions not only about the role of the university but also about the foundations of society itself. In order to understand the meaning and impact of recent events affecting the decline in stature of the liberal arts, the recent past is examined. Federal aid to universities for socially-oriented programs of study, the trend toward specialization, and student demands for courses they perceive as relevant to their interests have had an impact on the liberal arts in higher education and also in the elementary and secondary schools. Reasons why liberal arts study are crucial in the face of societal developments are addressed. (SW)

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"The Liberal Education -- Freeing Us From The Tyranny Of Forever Learning By Trial And Error"

by

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U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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With the theme of today's Forum being "Urgent Issues in American Education," I am certain that many of you would have expected me to discuss the fiscal difficulties at universities as we enter the 1980's; or, declining federal support for research; or, the issue of public versus private education; or, the declining college board scores of entering freshmen. These issues are all vitally important -- but they are not what I wish to discuss with you today.

It is perhaps paradoxical that our preoccupation with important issues like these may have distracted us from issues even more pertinent to American education.

But, of all the traits that distinguish us as human, none is so complex in its nature and so perplexing in its consequences as our capacity for paradox.

It is a truism that in the realm of human endeavor things are seldom what they seem. To that we might reasonably add that they are almost never what we say they are either.

For we are endowed with the remarkable faculty to say one thing even as we do its opposite, and to enjoy it. We are liberal with the truth about our nature and our world whenever it serves our ends to do so, and we are, so far as we know, the only creatures to possess the instinct to deceive ourselves as well as our predators.

Yet, at the same time, our struggles, whatever their origin and however we perceive them, also teach us bravery, dignity, and the will to prevail. We are capable of seeing beyond our individual existences to the collective life we share as a culture, and of acting upon that vision for the common good.

In short, we have discovered by experience that to be human is to be many things, that there are truths about us which, no matter how contradictory they appear, are truths nonetheless, and that the potential for the very best, and the very worst, is in us all.

Knowing this about ourselves, we have held throughout our history that exposure to a range of perspectives on human behavior is essential to our education. We have codified all that we know or can imagine about ourselves and our world in a body of learning that is intended to illuminate the struggles of those who follow after us, as well as our own, so that each succeeding generation profits in some measure from the experience and creativity of those who preceded them.

This body of learning is called by many names -- "literary studies," "the humane letters," "the humanities," "culture," "the liberal arts." However it is known, it comprises what we have done, what we know of our observable world, how we think and communicate, and the tools to put

such information to practical use in shaping individual lives.

We have assumed, quite rightly in my judgment, that early adulthood is a time in our lives when we are still unformed and in need of aculturation. The university is one mechanism we have created to facilitate this process, and the liberal arts enable each of us to make what W. E. B. DuBois described as "that fine adjustment which forms the secret of civilization."

What we know today as "liberal education" is as much an approach to learning as it is a specific course of study. The importance of the liberal arts to our lives not only as educated men, but also as mankind, extends far beyond the formal disciplines that make them up. The liberal arts are integral to achieving proficiency in all disciplines; they provide the context of values in which further, specialized development takes place.

Liberal education also affords us a means of recognizing and utilizing the patterns of continuity that run through our history, freeing us from the tyranny of forever learning by trial and error.

Perhaps most importantly, liberal education is the vehicle by which we transmit to our young the acquired wisdom and skills of a civilization.

In sum, the liberal arts are the foundation upon which

all that we are today, for better or for worse, has been built.

We find ourselves in a time, however, when liberal education has fallen -- or perhaps "has been pushed" better describes it -- into disrepute. Statistically the picture is grim. Fewer of our students are electing to pursue courses of study in the liberal arts, and fewer still are graduating with degrees in the many specialties the liberal arts encompass. We offer fewer and fewer required courses in these studies, and those we do offer are often poorly and superficially taught by the least experienced, least qualified, and least interested of our faculties. Fewer and fewer dollars are being channeled to support liberal education, and a shocking number of our four-year, liberal arts colleges have been forced either to close their doors or to revise drastically their course offerings.

It would appear that we have entered an era in which the kind of wisdom imparted by a liberal arts education no longer is highly valued by our society, and is being cast aside in the pursuit of other ends. If this is the case, the implications of such a turn of events are indeed grave. For abandonment of the liberal arts raises disturbing questions not only about the role of the university in our society, but also about the very foundations of society itself.

That is why I believe that the liberal arts, and their future in American higher education, are among the most important issues confronting our universities today.

To understand the meaning and impact of recent events affecting the decline in stature of the liberal arts, it is necessary to look back into the recent past. It is important to recall that the liberal arts truly flourished in this century in a decade in which the American economy, in fact, American democracy, faced one of its most severe threats.

It was in the very midst of the Great Depression that Robert Maynard Hutchins, Richard McKeon, and Mortimer Adler established the College at the University of Chicago, Lionel Trilling and his colleagues brought national attention to the introduction to contemporary civilization program at Columbia, the classical curriculum was introduced at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, and experimental and highly innovative curricula emerged at Bennington and Black Mountain. At a time when the material underpinning of our society creaked, shuddered, and threatened collapse, higher education experienced a significant shift toward the moral foundations of Western culture.

The emergence of the liberal arts in the 1930's was sidetracked by the disruption and uncertainty of World War II, and we emerged from that conflict a different nation.

During the late Forties, into the Fifties, and even as recently as the early Sixties, most major universities and virtually all non-technical four-year colleges were committed to broad degree programs in the liberal arts. But during this same period a new influence was exerting itself in American education, and the liberal arts, and their proponents, found their status was being eroded steadily by its financial power and seemingly insatiable appetite for the technical specialist.

This influence, of course, was -- and still is -- the federal government. The war-time recruitment of university personnel -- whose ranks were swelled by refugees from the great centers of learning in Europe -- to undertake a range of research projects for the national government was intensified in the years that followed. Through thousands of such programs from space and medicine to weaponry and covert intelligence, our universities became the handmaidens of government, and the rapid growth of our great graduate schools was financed in large measure by federal funds.

With the establishment of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare under President Eisenhower, the government developed a centralized bureaucracy with which to wield its growing influence in the classroom. Gradually at first, and then with increasing momentum, the federal government began to intrude itself into the management of

education in this country.

In the name of an array of social causes, the government began to use our educational system as the principal tool for change in society at large. It was not long until the effects of this policy were felt from the neighborhood elementary school to the university campus. Soon every federal program was bound up in complex and even conflicting requirements aimed at achieving specific social ends largely unrelated to their basic purposes. In their rush to comply with these socially-oriented restrictions, lest the federal faucet be shut off, our universities abdicated more and more of their educational and management prerogatives.

Today, federal aid to university research, and even more massive sums of aid in other forms, have come to dictate to a dangerously large extent where our priorities lie in higher education. In our technology-hungry society, the liberal arts are not high on the list.

A free-spending government was not the only influence to be felt on the university campus during these years. America's corporate community also found our institutions of higher learning fertile ground for advancing its own ends at what has proved to be a very modest cost.

Like the federal government, American corporations have turned increasingly to the university for basic and applied research. The corporate funds which were made avail-

able to finance this research have resulted in countless senior faculty, and their students, redirecting their interests and energies to such projects, and have further advanced academic specialization to the detriment of broader studies. In addition, business and industry are the largest employers in our nation, and their needs for personnel, supported by their financial resources, and implemented by the many recruiters visiting our campuses, also have played a role in redirecting the basic thrust of higher education. Again, in the confrontation between the values of a liberal education and the rewards of specialization, the liberal arts have lost, and lost badly.

But we must recognize the cold, hard truth that government and industry could not have influenced higher education so significantly without the participation of educators themselves. Proponents of liberal education, in their efforts to respond to the changes taking place around them, often unwittingly provided some of the best arguments against their cause.

Early on in this process of change, many in liberal education recognized which way the winds were blowing, and began what proved to be a largely fruitless effort to put a new face on their profession. The rise of academic specialization was perceived by many liberalists and specialists alike as antithetical to the basic traditions and tenets of the liberal arts. In an attempt to demonstrate that the liberal arts could be as arcane as the more technical

disciplines, many educators lost sight of the primary function of liberal education, and its role as a foundation for advanced specialization.

The specialists, for their part, scorned both what they saw as a lack of discipline and usefulness in the liberal arts, and the attempts of liberal educators to climb aboard the specialization bandwagon. A kind of truce was arrived at in which the liberal educators enthusiastically -- or so it seemed -- endorsed the work of the specialists as a positive force for keeping the liberal arts fresh and revelant, and the specialists gave tacit, and grudging, approval to the liberal educators' claim that the liberal arts enhanced and made meaningful the work done in scientific laboratories and specialized professional programs.

Like most treaties, few really believed in either the truth or viability of such a philosophical compromise, and the specialists, with their commitment from the university administration, and the vast financial support of government and industry, clearly enjoyed the liberal educators' discomfort at the new balance of power.

The growing tension between the liberalists and the advocates of academic specialization was seriously aggravated by the social and political upheaval of the 1960's. Liberal education was flailed roundly by student activists for its lack of "relevance" and, already on the defensive,

many of those who labored longest and hardest in behalf of the liberal arts seemed to lose their grip entirely in a manic rush to prove their worth in a rapidly, sometimes violently, changing society.

Catalogs began to fill with non-required courses that ranged from the once unimaginable to the outright bizarre, even by the standards of those turbulent years. The search for relevance turned out to be a capitulation to the trendy and shallow in education, which liberal educators, with some heat, always had claimed to abhor. In the process, they lost the respect of their students, their colleagues, and, most sobering, themselves. They had rushed to turn their backs on the most basic of truths underlying the liberal arts, and the price proved to be a terrible one. They saw the ground lost grow greater every day, a loss felt all the more keenly because it was self-inflicted.

There is a third force that has had considerable impact on the fortunes of the liberal arts in recent years -- the students of the Sixties and Seventies. Born between 1950 and 1960, the young people who entered our universities in the past 10 years grew up with the first stirrings of the "me first" ethic now prevalent in our society.

These children are members of a family unit under attack as obsolete. Because of their exposure to the electronic media, they possess virtually first-hand know-

ledge of political assassination, civil disobedience, corruption in government and the corporate board room, abortion, euthanasia, recreational drug use, and human sexuality in its positive and negative aspects. They are materialistic, self-absorbed, poorly educated when they reach us, and disdainful of the traditional values the university represents.

Our students have a sometimes distasteful sense of their personal likes and dislikes, but lack a personal sense of history. They are, by and large, and despite their protests to the contrary, desperate for convenience and economic security, but scorn hard work and the postponement of gratification as a means of attaining these goals. In their headlong rush to become employable, they are casting aside the opportunity to become educated as well.

These are not minds receptive to the abstractions of the liberal arts.

It must be said that the fault does not lie entirely with them. Again, we educators have had a hand in provoking our students' disdain for all but the immediately and obviously profitable. Little that they encounter in their elementary schools prepares them for the kind of thought and discipline a liberal education demands, and, with few exceptions, they lack the basic skills to perform adequately even the most rudimentary tasks associated with serious

study. Our insistence that the public schools commit their resources to compensatory and remedial programs designed to correct social disorders arising outside the classroom, and the readiness with which our schools have accepted this responsibility, has left little time or energy for the formidable task of educating our children in the basic concepts and skills which undergird the liberal arts.

And when these students reach the university lecture hall, what they most often encounter is a mirror image of themselves -- young instructors who are a product of the same rootless, fundamentally anti-intellectual environment and who have as little comprehension of liberal education as their charges.

In looking back over the past 30 years we can see a pattern emerging in American education at all levels. Both government and industry, by accident or design, are seeking to redefine education as we have known it. They are using our schools and universities as tools of social and economic policies crafted to perpetuate themselves. In such a framework of values, based on technological innovation and the exploitation of specialized skills, there is no room for learning for its own sake, or the formal, objective study of the

ambiguities of human thought and action that is central to liberal education. The liberal arts, once held in the highest esteem in our culture, today confront a new ethic in which the chief god is the bottom line, and in which to succeed materially, we must suppress our own humanity.

There are many who hold that this trend in education, and in society as a whole, is a good thing, and that the primary responsibility of our universities is to prepare our students for the world they will find waiting for them upon graduation. The demands of that world are such, this argument goes, that there is neither the time, nor the necessity, to engage in the study of our past, nor any value in seeking answers to the problems which press in upon us in the abstract ruminations on the human condition of literature, art, and philosophy. Our world requires the highly focused skills of specialists, this argument concludes, who can bring specific knowledge to the solution of specific problems. It is therefore beneficial, we would be led to believe, to manipulate our educational system to such ends, and to reinforce these goals with appropriate economic rewards.

This argument fails, however, on three levels. As a social philosophy its greatest weakness is that it does not work. During the past three decades tensions among the various social, ethnic, and economic strata of our society have worsened, often erupting into violence directed

toward the symbols of material gain this philosophy holds out as proof of its value. We have, in fact, created a vast new "underclass" within our society made up of those who, for whatever reason, cannot or will not function within a capitalist technocracy. Our present course is serving only to isolate us further from positive interaction with our fellowmen, and widening the gap between the haves and have-nots.

In addition, this argument may be one of the reasons we are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain that delicate balance between inflation and unemployment that keeps our economy moving forward. Certainly, most of the economic gains that have been recorded in the decade of the 1970's have been more than offset by spiralling inflation -- a problem which seems to confound economists and government officials alike. Perhaps, the message we are discovering is that an unforeseen corollary to the new materialism is the loss of public control over the institutions that determine the cost of the goods and services we value so highly to the point where they are becoming the masters of our lives, rather than our servants.

And finally, as an educational philosophy, this view of our world has been an unmitigated disaster. There is much evidence to suggest that we are becoming a nation of functional illiterates reduced to mindless entertainments as a distraction from our sense of the emptiness of our lives. We can neither read nor reason, measure nor cal-

culate, and we are giving up these functions which define our humanity to our machines. We are becoming captives to the world we rushed to create, and, as Plato observed, when the servant becomes master, chaos must result.

I submit that the events we see around us are evidence of the failure, on a grand scale, of the forces of social and economic manipulation and exploitation, and offer a profound case for reinstituting the liberal arts to a position of prominence in our universities.

No matter what the forces of specialization may preach to the contrary, our own instincts tell us that we were meant not only to survive, but also to prevail.

In the Fifteenth Century, Pico della Mirandola of Florence observed that "The saying 'know thyself' urges and encourages us to the investigation of all nature, of which the nature of man is both the connecting link and the 'mixed bowl.' For he who knows himself, in himself, knows all things." We are learning in the laboratory today the enduring truth of that statement. Recent research in subatomic physics, genetics, and deep space has shown us that there are patterns of existence which are replicated in all things living and non-living and which are basic to human life. We are learning each day that we do indeed contain universes, and, I believe, that the time has come when our technological knowledge is best relegated to its rightful place as a tool with which to better understand ourselves.

Matthew Arnold, the critic, poet, and education official, recognized that "men of culture are the true apostles of equality." In his Culture and Anarchy, Arnold stated that "Plenty of people will try to indoctrinate the masses with ... the creed of their own profession or party....but culture works differently..,.It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light." Whatever quarrel we may have with Arnold's language, we cannot deny that recognition of those characteristics and dreams which all men share in common is the most solid of foundations for righting social inequalities. Where morality by legislative and judicial decree has failed, the liberal arts provide a common ground upon which all men can meet and share their experiences in striving to achieve lives richer in content and in meaning.

Perhaps the most telling argument for the reemergence of liberal education in our institutions of higher learning lies in the fact that such studies enable us to exercise a most basic and vital aspect of our natures. The liberal arts do not exist apart from human life, but are inextricably bound up in it; our desire to increase our knowledge in these fields is as much a part of us as our physical needs. It is the way in which we grow emotionally and intellectually.

In the First Century A.D., Marcus Tullius Cicero argued that "When noble and elevated natural gifts are supplemented and shaped by the influence of theoretical knowledge, the result is then something truly remarkable and unique." That is to say, I believe, that when the best in us is enhanced by the formal study of the history and consequences of our culture, we are something more than those who lack such knowledge; we are, in essence, more fully human. And, as Cicero added, liberal education helps us "to understand what a better life could be, and how to bring that ideal into effect." For it is basic to humanity to seek to be the masters of fate, and not its slaves.

It was this recognition of the human need for what we have come to call the liberal arts that underlies what is probably the most widely recognized argument for liberal education advance by Cicero. "Reading," he said speaking of literature, philosophy, and history, "stimulates the young and diverts the old, increases one's satisfaction when things are going well, and when things are going badly provides a refuge and a solace....It is a companion which never lets me down."

Today, we can see clearly that, contrary to the expectations of many, specialization alone provides no lasting solutions to the multitude of difficult and potentially dangerous problems we confront. I believe that we must

begin immediately to reconstruct a system of education which broadens our view of the world in which we live, and enables our young adults to bring to their chosen work -- whatever it may be -- knowledge of the totality of human achievement, and the wisdom of centuries of human experience.

Our universities must reassert themselves as a balance between the transitory needs of our society and the enduring truths of our existence. We must cease doing the work of government and industry and reclaim our position as the mechanism in our society which instructs and enlightens these institutions in how best to function for the benefit of us all.

Much of what we must accomplish in the coming years may well require that we take a radically different view of how we teach, what we teach, and those we teach it to. We may find that much of the innovative and even outrageous that has evolved in higher education in the past 10 years has a valid place in our efforts to restore liberal education as the central thrust of learning in our culture. Whatever must be done, we must begin now to undertake the same kind of massive shift in education emphasis for the benefit of the liberal arts that has been thrust upon us in the name of specialization.

We have in the end come full circle, demonstrating both our strengths and our weaknesses, the paradox of humanity.

In our concern for a better life, we have lost sight of what the countless millions who preceded us learned by the most demanding of all teachers -- experience -- and succumbed to the expediency of what Ortega y Gasset rightly called the "barbarism of specialization." But the same determination that has taken us so far down the wrong path can be used to find a new direction for American education.

I believe that we are ready as a society to seek that direction, and to pursue it in whatever path it may take us. For we know that at the end of our journey we will find ourselves, and the keys to unlock the remaining mysteries of our world. For, like the liberal arts themselves, there is something in us that demands it.

"... Something great is going to begin," Ortega y Gasset wrote in Man and His Circumstances, "that is to say it is not yet here, it is not yet known, it is still problematical and difficult; and for persons who accept life only as a convenience, it is still dead. But any man whose veins throb with a bit of bood has need for the opposite....an imperative sense of creation, a going towards something new."

Thank you.